

Elk Island National Park

Alberta



View of Astotin Lake

View of Astotin Lake



Moose and elk in winter



Introducing a park and an idea
Canada covers half a continent, fronts on three oceans, and stretches from the extreme Arctic more than halfway to the equator. There is a great variety of land forms in this immense country, and Canada's National Parks have been created to preserve important examples for you and for generations to come.

The National Parks Act of 1930 specifies that National Parks are "dedicated to the people . . . for their benefit, education and enjoyment" and must remain "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Elk Island National Park, 76 square miles in area, is in the northern section of Alberta's Beaver Hills, which rise 100—200 feet above the surrounding plain. It was named after the large herds of wapiti or elk which once lived in the area. Viewed from the air, the park looks like an island of rolling, forested hills, with many lakes, ponds, and bogs, set in the comparatively flat, fertile farmlands of central Alberta. The entire park is enclosed by an eight-foot fence, while another fence encloses the recreation area to keep out the bison that are the park's best-known attraction.

The land: a legacy from the ice age
The Cretaceous bedrock which underlies the park's rolling hills was formed from sand, gravel, and mud laid down perhaps 100 million years ago in an ancient sea that once covered the land. However, there are no apparent surface outcrops of bedrock in the park.

Elk Island's rolling topography is a legacy from the Pleistocene Ice Age, which took place between one million and 10,000 years ago. The landscape, known as a "dead-ice moraine", was created when the vast ice sheets which once covered most of the northern regions of North America stopped in their advance. During its slow northeastward retreat, the melting ice left behind deposits of glacial debris in the area, forming a landscape characterized by knobs (ridges) and kettles (depressions). In the park, this debris averages 100 feet in depth, and contains boulders and rocks which the ice sheets carried from the Canadian Shield to the north and left scattered around the park area.

Bogs, lakes, and ponds have formed in the depressions in the glacial debris. The largest lake in the park, Astotin Lake, measures 2½ miles wide and averages 10 feet in depth (though a considerable portion is between 12 and 18 feet deep). The name Astotin is believed to derive from the Cree, meaning "lake of many islands". There are 21 islands in this shallow body of water.

The plants: a northern community
The park's plants, have colonized this relatively young landscape only within the last 10,000 years.

Most of the 240 plants which have been identified are typical of the mixed-wood forest regions found in much of

central Alberta. The park's dominant tree at present, the trembling aspen, controls by light and moisture most of the plant life within this region. Its moisture-loving cousin, the balsam poplar, is also common, while large-leaved herbaceous plants such as the bunchberry, sarsaparilla, wintergreen and violet, occupy the shady park floor.

Berry and nut-bearing shrubs, including the choke-cherry, pincherry, saskatoon, rose, and hazelnut, are particularly abundant where the trees are not too dense and there is a greater amount of sunlight penetration.

Within the groves of white spruce, found on the major islands and in the northern section of the park, horsetail and twin flower are the common ground plants.

Grass and sedge meadows contain numerous prairie plants whose flowers bloom from late June to late August. Many shrubs and herbaceous plants, including some sub-arctic varieties, are also found in these areas.

The numerous ponds teem with plant and animal life. By mid-summer the tiny, floating duckweed covers many with green. Pondweeds thrust cylindrical flowerheads above the water, the floating, globular blossoms of the yellow pond lily are conspicuous on a few ponds throughout July and early August, while the showy, white blooms of calla and arrowhead, are ranked near the margins.

All the bogs here are small. A number are still vigorous, although some are nearing the end of their life span, and

are slowly changing to sedge, willow and birch swamps. Their plant life is unique, though limited in variety. The foundation of Sphagnum moss creates an acidic, nutrient-poor peat. In this flourishing black spruce and, to a lesser extent, tamarack, Labrador tea, cranberry, blueberry and cloudberry form a low, dense shrub layer; while three-leaved Solomon's-seal (a lily) is one of the few flowers. Branching, and greyish-white, the reindeer moss (really a lichen) forms patches on the drier hummocks; other lichens grow on tree trunks and branches.

The park contains plants no longer locally common outside its borders. Among these are the marsh marigold, wild sarsaparilla and representative plants of the orchid and lily families. Still common within the park, the white or paper birch trees are remnants of the once-abundant giants from which the Indians made canoes, shelter, dishes, and clothing.

The animals: each seeks its own habitat
Animals frequent those areas which best supply their food and shelter needs. Most of the park's wildlife belongs to the boreal world; but species native to the surrounding plains are also seen here.

Some 30 species of mammals have been recorded in the park. The smaller ones include the short-tailed shrew, red squirrel, pocket gopher, least chipmunk, striped skunk,

porcupine, Richardson's weasel, and several kinds of voles and mice. The coyote and mink are the largest carnivores or flesh-eating animals in the area. Beaver, exterminated by over-trapping, were re-introduced and are again abundant. Three members of the deer family, the moose, elk, and white-tailed deer, are common in the park. Plains bison, commonly called buffalo, range north of Highway 16, and during the tourist season an exhibition herd of these animals is kept fenced a short distance from the south gate. A herd of wood bison, a rare sub-species, is isolated in a section just south of Highway 16. The rest of the park's mammals roam freely in a wild state.

Ponds and sloughs are the prime habitats of many varieties of invertebrates (animals without backbones) including snails, leeches, and insects. The stickleback, a minnow-like fish, occurs only in Astotin Lake.

Just over 200 species of birds have been recorded in the park. Most of these occur during the summer and migration seasons. This part of central Alberta is crossed by major North American flyways, providing excellent opportunities for waterfowl observations during spring and fall migration. Flocks of sandhill cranes are particularly frequent in autumn, though most fly over without stopping.

Perhaps the most common waterfowl are the noisy gulls and terns, constantly calling to one another over the lakes. Populations of waterfowl often fluctuate over the

Lakeside nature trail



In 1947, a further 24-square-mile area south of Highway 16 was acquired from the province of Alberta.

How to get there
Elk Island National Park is easily accessible by road. The south or major entrance is situated on Highway 16, 23 miles east of Edmonton's city limits, and the recreation area is about nine miles from this gate, on the east side of Astotin Lake.

The north gate is four miles south of Lamont, accessible from Fort Saskatchewan via Highway 15.

The west gate is two miles south and 14 miles east of Fort Saskatchewan. The park headquarters is close to the west gate on the west side of Astotin Lake.

How to enjoy the park
Season — The park is open all year, although the three entrance gates are manned only from May through September, and most tourist services are available only during these months. Summer is the busiest time, but visits to the park at other seasons are increasing every year. Hiking, swimming, canoeing, boating, golfing, and camping are the favourite summer activities, while cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are increasing in popularity during the winter months.

Boating — Boating is permitted only on Astotin Lake and during periods designated by the Park Superintendent so as to prevent detrimental effects on waterfowl. When on the water, boaters must comply with federal navigation regulations and carry proper safety equipment.

Fishing — There is no fishing in the park. Only two small non-game species of fish exist, the stickleback and fathead minnow.

Hiking — This is one of the best ways to explore a national park. The park's many miles of trails are marked on a topographical map, available from the administration office or information centres. The park's two self-guiding nature trails, the Parkland and Lakeside trails, pass through several different vegetation zones.

Swimming — From mid-May until mid-September there is supervised swimming at Sandy Beach on Astotin Lake. However, "swimmer's itch", caused by a micro-organism common to most lakes in the region, is a problem at certain times. Facilities here include change areas, showers and washrooms.

Some don't's
National Parks are selected areas set apart as nature sanctuaries and special care is taken to maintain them in their natural state. For this reason, all wildlife, including birds and animals, and all plants, trees, rocks, and fossils are to be left undisturbed. Even the wildflowers are not to be picked; they must be left for others to enjoy. Feeding, touching, or molesting wild animals is not permitted.

Red-necked grebe's nest with eggs



Where to stay
Camping brings you into the closest contact with the park's natural environment. Camping facilities are provided at Sandy Beach campground; daily fees vary according to the services provided. Camping space is allocated on a first-come, first-served basis and the maximum allowable stay is two weeks. Campgrounds open about May 15 and close about September 15, depending on the weather.

However, primitive facilities are available during the winter.

Additional accommodation is offered in nearby communities, where visitors will also find restaurants, stores, laundries, and other services.

Other facilities
There is a nine-hole golf course and refreshment stand in the recreation area.

Fires
Campfires may be set only in fireplaces provided for this purpose, or in outdoor portable stoves. Barbecues may be used only in campgrounds or picnic areas, and all coals must be dumped into existing park fireplaces.

Anyone finding an unattended fire should try to extinguish it, or if it is beyond his control, report it at once to the nearest park employee.

How to get the most out of your visit
To help you understand and appreciate Elk Island's complex natural environment, you are urged to take advantage of the free interpretive program, conducted by the park naturalist and his trained staff. It will provide you with an insight into how climate, land forms, plants, and animals are interrelated, and it will make your stay more rewarding.

During the day there are conducted field trips; in the evening informative talks, illustrated with slides or films are given in the interpretive theatre.

Self-guiding trails, exhibits, interpretive signs, and viewpoints also explain the park's natural features.

Information on the interpretive program is available from bulletin boards, information centres, and park staff. Special groups, including school, scout, and guide organizations, may take advantage of these programs throughout the year.

Where to get information
Detailed information on all park aspects including natural history is available. Uniformed staff will answer questions, provide maps, outline travel routes and refer visitors to the various areas and facilities in the park.

Special events are posted on bulletin boards.

Park wardens and naturalists, though not primarily responsible for general information, will help visitors whenever possible.

Additional information about the park is available from the Superintendent, Elk Island National Park, Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. For information about other National Parks, write the Director, National and Historic Parks Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0H4.

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Elk Island National Park

Note
This is but a reference map,
designed to give you a general
idea of what you will find in this
park. It is not a hiking, boating or
road map.

- Legend**
- Highway
 - Secondary Road
 - Trail
 - Lake
 - ✕ Picnic Area
 - ⛺ Campground
 - ⦿ Nature Trail
 - ⦿ Parking
 - ⦿ Beach
 - ⦿ Lavatory
 - ⦿ Boating
 - ⦿ Interpretive Theatre
 - ⦿ Highway Number



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